

# Developmental History of Derry, NH

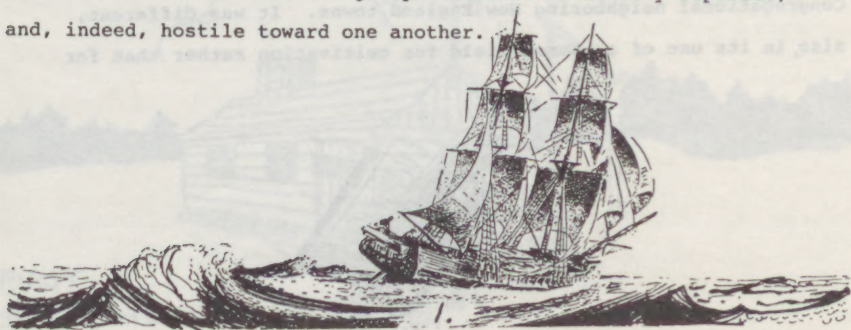
Guidelines for Historic Sites and Districts



# Developmental History of Derry

The town of Derry is located in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, about 12 miles south of the city of Manchester. It is bordered on the north by Auburn and Chester, on the east by Hampstead, on the south by Windham, and on the west by Londonderry. There are several lakes and ponds in Derry, most notably Beaver Lake, Ballard Pond, Island Pond, and Adams Pond. The highest point in Derry is the top of Warner Hill in East Derry, though as is typical of most of northern New England, many hills in Derry offer scenic views of rolling fields and woodlands. Indeed, Derry's landscape is in some ways quintessentially New England, and even casual observation of the countryside reveals vestiges of the town's agricultural beginnings. Cellar holes of farm outbuildings are now obscured by the dense second-growth forests that cover most of the land. Stone walls, which run through woods and across open fields, have their courses interrupted by newly constructed homes. Their presence reminds the new homeowners that their one-acre house lots were once part of a working farm's pasture, woodlot, or field.

The first European settlers to come to Derry were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who emigrated from Londonderry, Ireland, in 1718, seeking religious freedom. These settlers were descendants of Scottish Presbyterians who, seeking to distance themselves from the enforced practice of Anglicanism in their native Scotland, had settled on land owned by King James I in Ireland. The native Catholic Irish regarded the arrival of such large numbers of Protestants as an invasion, and the two groups remained distinctly separate, and, indeed, hostile toward one another.





These hostilities sporadically erupted into open violence, and, indeed, warfare. From December, 1688, to July, 1689, the walled city of Londonderry was in a state of siege as the army of James II attempted to take the city as part of his effort to regain the throne of England from William of Orange. James's attempt failed; but some thirty years after the siege, life in Ireland was not markedly improved for the Scottish Presbyterians, leading a group of them to seek greater religious freedom in the New World.

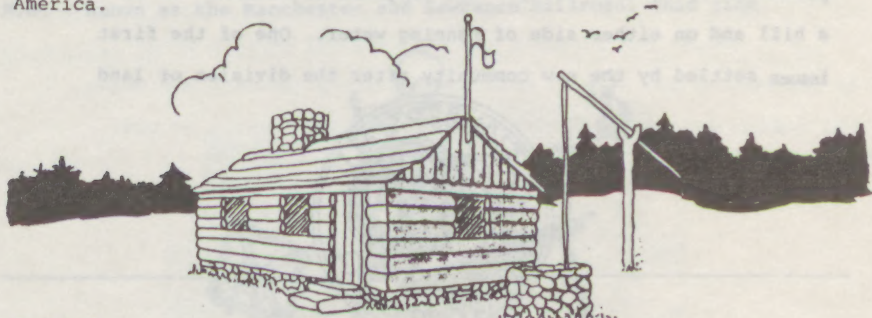
Sixteen of the families who migrated from Londonderry to Boston in 1718 were led by the Rev. Mr. MacGregor. They settled on land north of Haverhill, Massachusetts, which they named Nutfield for the abundance of nut trees they found growing there. Prior to their emigration, Rev. MacGregor had been granted the right to settle on twelve square miles of unclaimed Massachusetts land by Governor Shute of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Rev. MacGregor and his congregation chose Nutfield, thinking it was in Massachusetts. When they petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts for confirmation of their grant, the General Court replied that the land in question was not in Massachusetts but in New Hampshire. The Nutfield settlers then petitioned Governor Wentworth of New Hampshire and discovered that John Wheelwright, then Lieutenant Governor of New Hampshire, held title to the land, title he had purchased from the Indians. He did, however, grant title to the settlers, but with the provision that some of the best farm land be set aside for him and Governor Wentworth.

Nutfield's Presbyterianism set it apart from its predominantly Congregational neighboring New England towns. It was different, also, in its use of a common field for cultivation rather than for



grazing which was the more usual practice. But the settlers of Nutfield were very much like the settlers of most New England towns in one important way: their allotting of houselots in narrow strips fronting on running water. Each family was allotted 120 acres: a 60-acre houselot and a 60-acre woodlot. These first houselots were laid out on either side of West Running Brook, each lot being 30 rods wide and 60 acres deep. The configuration of this first settlement, known as the Double Range, with its bark-covered log houses clustered thus close to one another, reveals not only the Europeans' distrust and fear of the wilderness but also their need to build not so much individual farms but a community of like-minded families. Indeed, Nutfield was the first Presbyterian community in America.

The years preceding the Revolution were peaceful ones in Londonderry. The bark-covered log homes on either side of West Running Brook were the first structures built, and soon after completing their homes and before completing construction of their meetinghouse, the practical-minded settlers built two garrisons for protection in case of Indian attack. These garrisons were located at the present day junction of Floyd and Lane Roads and at 24 Thornton Street. The town was spared any direct involvement in the French and Indian War and was, in fact, never attacked by Indians. The settlers also constructed a saw mill and a grist mill and planted white potatoes on the communal field, thus distinguishing Nutfield as the site where the white potato was first cultivated in North America.



FIRST  
SCHOOL HOUSE 1723



In 1720, the first road was laid out, running from the Upper Village to the Lower Village, and in 1722, Nutfield was incorporated as the town of Londonderry. During the Revolutionary War, Londonderry sent a large number of men to serve. The most notable figures were General John Stark, the hero of the Battle of Bennington, and Matthew Thornton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Matthew Thornton's birthplace is still standing in Derry Village.

As was typical of New England towns in the eighteenth century, political and economic pressures led to the division of the large town of Londonderry. As the town grew in population, settlement inevitably moved beyond the confines of the Double Range. The South Range and English Range were apportioned to new settlers as was the western section of the town. As early as 1730, just 11 years after the initial settlement, residents of the westerly part of the town petitioned Town Meeting to be set aside as a separate parish. In 1733, the first church was built in the West Parish. In 1740, the area which is now the town of Windham was granted a charter and was set off from Londonderry. In 1827, 295 citizens petitioned the legislature to divide Londonderry into two towns. The western portion retained the name Londonderry, and the eastern portion became known as Derry.

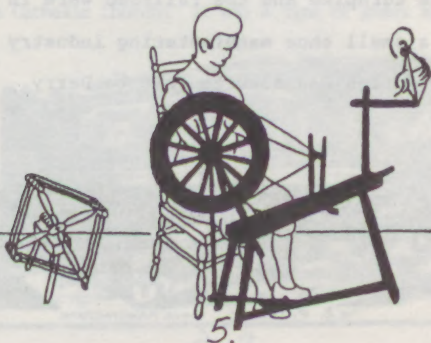
Perhaps the most important factor in determining a town's growth and settlement patterns is topography. This is particularly true of Derry. The original settlement was on a hill and on either side of running water. One of the first issues settled by the new community after the division of land



was the issuing of water rights. This was followed by the building of dams and mills. David Cargill built a grist mill at the eastern end of Beaver Lake and a fulling mill on Adams Pond. There was a sawmill where Chase's mill is today on Beaver Brook and W.W. Poor erected a mill on Thornton Street at the foot of East Derry hill. The settlers had brought flax seed with them from Ireland; and in addition to farming, they early on began the production of a very high quality linen, the finest linen produced in North America. Were it not for the rivers and brooks providing power for the mills, the town would not have been able to produce "Londonderry Linen."

Another factor critical to shaping a town is transportation routes. In 1804, the legislature authorized the building of a toll road from Concord to the Massachusetts line at Andover. This was to become the Londonderry Turnpike, completed in 1806, and now known as By-Pass 28. This road runs through the Lower Village, also known as Derry Village. Before the turnpike was built, the Upper Village was the business center of the town. The Town Hall (now the Upper Village Hall), banks, shops, and the meetinghouse were located there, while the mills were in the Lower Village. By the 1820's the center of town was in Derry Village, around the turnpike.

In 1849, a railroad line was constructed linking the two great manufacturing cities of Lawrence, Mass., and Manchester, N.H. Known as the Manchester and Lawrence Railroad, this line





went through Derry in the western part of town, now known as Derry Depot. Just as the coming of the turnpike in 1806 had shifted the town's center from East Derry to Derry Village, so too the advent of the railroad drew the town center yet farther westward to the area surrounding the train station.

In addition the the Manchester and Lawrence Railroad, the Nashua and Rochester Railroad also ran through Derry, though with significantly less impact on the town, for it ran through the thinly populated southeastern section. Of more importance was the trolley line, the Chester and Derry Railroad. Chartered in 1891, the railroad was not completed until 1898. The C&D began at the Depot and ran east along East Broadway, up North Main Street at Derry Village, then down Thornton Street across Beaver Brook and on to East Derry Road. At Five Corners, the tracks turned on to Old Chester Road, then on to the Beaver Lake Pavillion by way of a private right of way. It then turned away from the lake and crossed North Shore Road, ran across fields and through woods to Adams Pond Road, back to Old Chester Road and continued to the Derry - Chester line at the present day Route 102 and then went on to Chester.

There was also an electric railroad connecting Derry to Manchester. The company was chartered in 1905 and service began in 1907. This line ran down West Broadway to Wyman Street, crossed Hillside Avenue at Dickey Street, over the Londonderry line. It proceeded through Londonderry to Manchester.

Though the turnpike and the railroad were in place by the 1850's, and a small shoe manufacturing industry had begun, the Industrial Revolution was slow to come to Derry. It was





not until after the Civil War that Derry's life as an industrial town really began, but the end of the nineteenth century, Derry's economic base had shifted irrevocably from farming to shoe manufacturing. The population had grown from 2,176 in 1830 to 3,583 in 1900. The once cleared fields and pasture land gradually returned to forests as farmers gave up the plow and took up the tools of the factory worker.

In 1870, Col. William Pillsbury, who had been manufacturing shoes in Londonderry, bought 18 buildings in Derry Depot to begin his shoe manufacturing enterprise in Derry. Col. Pillsbury's various shoe companies grew until by 1906 the W. S. & R. W. Pillsbury Co. was producing about 4,500 pairs of shoes daily.

As Derry Depot became the industrial and commercial focus of Derry with the coming of the railroad, industrial activity continued in Derry Village. The Benjamin Chase Co. was founded by Benjamin Chase in 1867 for the manufacture of reed ribs used in the weaving of cloth. The company grew and expanded and has continued the production of various wooden products to the present.

By 1891 electric lights had come to Derry, and by 1892, limited telephone service was available. The first automobile was seen in Derry in 1900, and by 1906 there were 19 automobiles in town.

The years from the turn of the century to the Depression were prosperous ones for Derry, characterized by large bequests from prominent families for the construction of public buildings and the founding of many social and philanthropic organizations. The Adams Memorial Building was built in 1903 and the MacGregor Library in 1926. The latter years of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth also saw the construction of many churches of various Protestant denominations and one Catholic Church. It was a time of great social consolidation;



Adams Memorial Building, Derry, N. H.

the community's moral and social values were, in many ways, institutionalized in these various organizations.

Though new shoe manufacturers came and went, the shoe industry as a whole was successful. At one point one company alone, Perkins and Hardy and Co. was producing 12,000 pairs of shoes a day. The area around Derry Depot was a bustling industrial center. The number of prosperous banks in Derry at this time and the amount of building going on attest to the town's healthy economy. In 1960, the town's largest remaining shoe factory, the Chelmsford Shoe Co. burned to the ground, along with four tenement buildings, a dozen homes, and a store. Unlike in 1915, when the town rebuilt a plant which had burned on the same location, no effort was made to rebuild. With the end of the Chelmsford Shoe Co. came the end of the dominance of the shoe industry in Derry. (The Derry Shoe Company closed in 1981 and Klev Brothers Shoe is still operating in 1986.) Just as the New Hampshire rocky hill farms of the nineteenth century could not compete with their more fertile midwestern counterparts, so too did the shoe factories fail to compete with the southern mills which had access to cheap labor and power.

With the passing of the shoe industry, Derry lost its industrial character. To some extent the shoe industry has been replaced with high tech manufacturing companies such as Hadco Printed Circuits and Electronics Corporation of America, but these industries in no way determine the town's character as the shoe industry had. Unlike their nineteenth century predecessors, these twentieth century industrial companies are not owned by local families. Several firms in Derry, such as the Benjamin Chase Co., L. H. Pillsbury, and Holmes and Wheeler were founded in the nineteenth century and prospered into the twentieth century in the hands of the same family.





The most famous of these family businesses, though, was the H. P. Hood Co.. In 1846 Harvey Hood purchased a milk route in Charlestown, Mass.. He established his dairy farm in Derry to supply the milk for his business in Boston. In 1856, he began shipping milk by way of the railroad. Over the course of several years, he amassed a 320 acre farm in the geographical center of Derry, beginning with his purchase of the Redfield Farm on East Broadway in Derry Village. Such Derry landmarks as the Hoodcroft Country Club, Hood Plaza, and Hood Junior High School are situated on land that was once part of the Hood Dairy Farm. The Hood Homestead is still standing on East Broadway.

In the nineteenth century the steam locomotive and the electric trolley car replaced the Concord Coach and the horse as means of transportation, so in the twentieth century with equal relentlessness and inevitability the automobile replaced the locomotive and the trolley. By 1928, the D & C trolley had ceased operations; the M & D street railway closed in 1926, and the last passenger train left Derry in 1953. With the coming of the automobile came increased miles of paved roads, highways, and eventually interstates. In 1938 the New Hampshire Turnpike, which had fallen into disrepair and disuse, was repaired and reopened by the W. P. A., Works Progress Administration. This technological change would forever change life in small New England towns like Derry. The increased mobility allowed Derry residents to seek work outside of Derry, and the commuter became commonplace. Indeed, by the present day it is the unusual Derry resident who works in Derry. Route I-93, with its direct connection to Boston, brought Derry to the very edge of Boston's urban sprawl. This and New Hampshire's favorable tax structure account for the tremendous growth in population which Derry has experienced in the last twenty years. The pressure which this increased population places on Derry's resources is increasing. The relative stagnation of the New Hampshire economy of the first half of the century allowed many of the state's cultural and architectural



resources to, at best, lay dormant, and, at worst, deteriorate. The character of the town changed as cellar holes of abandoned mills, factories, and farmhouses filled with second-growth vegetation and these reforested farmlands are now the site of housing developments to accomodate the needs of Derry's increasing population. (Derry projects a population of about 30,000 by the year 2,000.)

Despite this development, the town, for the most part, retains the character of a traditional New England village, as exemplified in fine old houses lining its original transportation routes, its three town centers, and attractive agricultural vistas of open fields and rolling hills, and shorefronts of its lakes. To a remarkable extent, the natural and built environments unite to lend a sense of continuity to the town's past and present.





## *Guidelines for Historic Districts and Sites*

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Derry is a place rich in history, going back two centuries and more to the early years of settlement in New Hampshire.

The Derry Historic District Commission has the responsibility today to see that our history is not lost, that important structures and features of the Old Derry are saved to be part of the new. In 1986, the townspeople of Derry made this happen when they established the Historic District Commission, giving it these very specific responsibilities:

- To safeguard the heritage of Derry.
- To help enrich its unique visual character
- To help foster civic pride in its beauty to residents and visitors, and hence strengthen its economy.
- To help stabilize and improve property values.
- To help promote the private and public use of our buildings and parks: for the education, prosperity, and general welfare of us all.

Once the district ordinances have been approved, owners planning to change the appearance of a building or plot of land within the Derry Historic District will need to keep this in mind:

Your proposal for the construction, repair, alteration, or demolition of apportion of any structure within the District will require approval of the Historic District Commission. This approval will also be required for signs, landscaping, sidewalks, and any other proposal relating to the setting of your building. It should be noted that the review of your building will be strictly limited to the exterior of the building and its site. You will not need to seek Commission approval for interior changes.

You will be able to perform ordinary maintenance and repair, so long as you do not alter the building's architectural features. In other words, you will be able to re-paint or re-roof, so long as your roof plane and roof materials remain the same; you can alter or install storm doors and storm windows, so long as no architectural features are changed.

DERRY HISTORIC  
DISTRICT COMMISSION  
48 East Broadway  
Derry NH 03035



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